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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: KARBALA PILGRIM ATTACK WORSE THAN REPORTED

REF: BAGHDAD 275

Classified By: PRT Team Leader Don Cooke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

11. (C) Summary: According to Karbala's police chief, the blast near the Imam Husayn shrine on February 12 that killed multiple people on Arba'ayniyah pilgrimage was caused by an explosive device (IED), not a suicide bomber as reported in the media. However, witnesses have told the PRT that the attack was carried out by a female suicide bomber. Personnel at Karbala's main hospital report casualty figures higher than those in initial media reports -- at least 12 people killed and more than 80 wounded, many of them badly burned and in critical condition. With several million pilgrims expected this month and limited police personnel available to search women, Karbala remains vulnerable to female suicide bombers during pilgrimage season. End Summary.

The Official Version  
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12. (U) According to Karbala police director BG Ali Muhammad al-Gireri, an IED -- probably fueled by a propane tank -- caused the blast that occurred at approximately 1630 local time on February 12. At a press conference on February 13, Gireri dismissed as inaccurate media reports quoting unnamed police officials stating that a suicide bomber was responsible. However, he confirmed local and international press figures concerning the casualties: Eight killed and 52 wounded. Gireri went on to enumerate the measures the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have undertaken in Karbala to safeguard the approximately 6 million pilgrims coming for Arba'ayniyah, which climaxes on the evening of February 15: 30,000 uniformed police, including 1,500 female officers to search women; a 5,000-man SWAT team; 400 rooftop snipers; a 175-man explosive ordinance disposal team; fixed- and rotary-wing air assets; and an undisclosed number of plainclothes male and female officers circulating among the visitors.

What Witnesses Say  
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13. (C) Witnesses contacted by the PRT dispute Gireri's assertion that the blast was caused by an IED. Two locally resident pilgrims -- one male, one female -- told a PRT member that, just before the blast, they saw a woman run from an alley into a stream of visitors proceeding on Bab al-Qibla approximately 200 meters from the Imam Husayn Shrine. The female insisted that the woman was wearing a belt-bomb. According to both witnesses, the explosions of propane tanks used by nearby food vendors burned many people. They said they escaped injury because they were entering their pension when the blast occurred.

14. (C) Medical personnel at Karbala's main al-Husayn Hospital, where virtually all of the victims were treated, told the PRT that more were killed and injured than officially reported. A doctor who spoke to a PRT member on the condition of anonymity said that 12 people were killed

outright in the explosion and more than 80 wounded. The latter number, he continued, includes many who are severely burned and in critical condition. He and other hospital personnel stated they anticipate some of the burn victims will not survive.

Comment: The Weak Link

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15. (C) With large numbers of widows, the Iraqi population has many more women than men, a fact PRT officers saw clearly when observing the provincial elections on January 31 (reftel). 1500 women cannot possibly search more than 3 million visitors effectively, no matter how expert or well-trained they may be. It would have been relatively easy for a female suicide bomber to enter the shrines area undetected, and we regard Gireri's insistence that the blast was the result of an IED as an attempt to divert attention from the weak link in the ISF's security regimen. End Comment.

CROCKER